

## Eastern Kentucky University Encompass

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English and Theatre Faculty and Staff Research

English and Theatre

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January 2006

# What Do We Really Want to Teach in Alice Munro's 'Walker Brothers'

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### Recommended Citation

Sweet, Charlie and Blythe, Hal, "What Do We Really Want to Teach in Alice Munro's 'Walker Brothers'" (2006). *English and Theatre Faculty and Staff Research*. Paper 6.  
[http://encompass.eku.edu/eng\\_fsresearch/6](http://encompass.eku.edu/eng_fsresearch/6)

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## What Do We Really Want to Teach in Alice Munro's "Walker Brothers Cowboy"?

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No matter how long or often we teach a course, in order to keep ourselves fresh, to provide a challenge, and to adapt to the shifting academic environment, we like to change the syllabus. Next semester, to include more contemporary and non-USA Americans in our Introduction to American Literature II survey, we're adding Alice Munro's "Walker Brothers Cowboy." At the same moment our courses evolve, changes are also occurring in higher education. The emphasis has switched from sage-on-the-stage instruction to active student learning and from mere accountability to course and curriculum assessment. So when we choose to present a work such as Munro's to a class, we now find ourselves reflecting on such questions as what is the most effective approach to this work and what do we want our students to take from this work? In an era of department goals, program rubrics, course objectives, and student learning outcomes, some of the answer has been prescribed for us; students must demonstrate certain knowledge, skills, and values.

Most of us, for instance, want our students to take certain knowledge from Munro's piece de resistance: biographical details of her life, her place in contemporary and Canadian literature, cultural insights (e.g., diversity, feminism), her recurring themes, and her use of basic literary techniques. Some of us want that knowledge communicated orally (whether alone or in groups), visually (perhaps through a PowerPoint presentation), or in writing (from quizzes, reader-response paragraphs, scholarly notes, and term papers). Some of us wish our students to demonstrate skills such as the ability to apply literary criticism/theory.

The question of what we really want from our students might be asked another way: what levels of intellectual behavior do we wish our students to demonstrate? Certainly, we are miles past desiring our students simply to regurgitate what they read and hear in class discussions. A flip through any pedagogical journal or a trip to a conference on teaching quickly reveals the contemporary desire to move our students beyond the level of basic learning/knowledge. In 1956 Benjamin Bloom developed a

taxonomy of learning, and in the 1990s Lorin Anderson, a former student of Bloom's, and a group of cognitive psychologists updated Bloom's pyramid. Looking at Munro through this prism provides one way of ascertaining what skills our students can develop through a confrontation with "Walker Brothers Cowboy."

The base of the revised version is **remembering**, which consists of a knowledge of literary figures, important dates, key biographical data, and relevant historical events. To aid this remembering and to help students select the major details, every period we open the session by giving them a five-question factual quiz that covers the author and period introduction as well as the literary work (the kind of questions your editor provides at the end of every issue of ESTSF). As we pointed out in a previous article, "The Evidence Doesn't Lie," all student learning builds from a close reading of the text and an awareness of who, what, where, and when. In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," we want our students to come to class knowing the major characters, the major events in the story, the story's location, and its time period (including its time of day and season).

The next tier of learning is **understanding**. While we hope students have begun this process before arriving in class, after collecting quizzes we begin to facilitate it by following two major principles. First, we desire our students to question what they read, their classmates, and us as instructors. Next semester, as with all our classes, we will provide our students with a handout, "How To Ask Effective Questions." To reinforce this notion, we will model the inquiring process by asking effective questions. With a contemporary work such as Munro's, we will ask some of the following:

- Does the story remind you of any of the Minimalist works we've been reading?
- Does a contemporary work from Canada seem much different from that written in our fifty states?
- Does Walker's work show the influence of the New Yorker school of fiction?
- Is the work typical of postmodern fiction?

Importantly, we never teach any work in isolation, but rather, since the course is a survey, we present the work as representative of some

major movement/concept (more later). Second, to deepen our students' understanding, we will borrow a learning device from critical thinking theorist Jerry Nosich that we have mnemonically re-christened The SEE-ing I. When we introduce a new concept, such as minimalism, we ask our students to go through a four-step process:

- State the concept in a few words (e.g., Minimalism is often defined as less is more.)
- Elaborate on the concept by writing a longer definition that begins with "In other words," and elucidate the idea in your own words (e.g., In other words, Minimalism is a concept in various fields of study from literature to architecture wherein the author ...)
- Exemplify the concept by providing an example (e.g., In "Shiloh," to underscore Norma Jean's sudden growth, Bobbie Ann Mason simply has Leroy think of his wife as Wonder Woman)
- Illustrate the concept by providing a word picture that begins with "It's like" (e.g., Minimalism is like remembering a song's entire tune by humming the first three notes).

The third stage of the pyramid is **applying**. Here we ask students to take previously discussed or recently introduced concepts such as Minimalism and to apply them to something new; in this case Munro's story. Since this course begins with Realism, by the time we reach Walker, the course will be about over, and students will be familiar with many concepts. Obviously, from other courses they will know the major critical approaches (e.g., New Criticism, Historicism, Archetypal, Psychological, Feminism) and core literary terms (e.g., method of narration, symbol, structure). They will have also learned course-specific major movements (i.e., Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, Post-modernism) and some course-specific concepts (e.g., regionalism, the other, hedonism). While we often ask our students to apply these general concepts to the specific work under discussion, next semester we will be trying something we recently learned ourselves. Since students tend to forget about 90 percent of what they learn in a course within three months, in the course-design stage we ask ourselves: what would we like them to recall about Am Lit II when we see them in five years at Alumni Reunion Weekend? In other words, since total recall is impossible and not necessary, what we are trying to do is to

reduce the course to its most fundamental and powerful concepts. So right now we're engaged in self-questioning in order to determine what are the most important ideas our students need to grasp; in fact, we ask ourselves if our students learn these ideas, could they then apply them to almost any work in American literature and layer out meaning from these kernel insights? After a lot of deliberation, we have boiled down Am Lit II to two fundamental and powerful concepts:

- Art reflects its culture.
- The Initiation Story is the backbone of American lit.

So, at that future reunion, while resting after that grueling football game and equally grueling Department of English cocktail party, long after they have forgotten that author who wasn't from the USA, perhaps even the author's gender, and any detail from the story that wasn't really about cowboys, what concepts from the past could our students apply to the latest piece of fiction they ran across in the newest issue of *The New Yorker* that would help that story make sense to them?

The fourth stage of the pyramid is **analyzing**. In "Using Mason's 'Shiloh' to Teach a Scholarly Frame of Mind," we discussed this skill as our goal in trying to develop in our students a scholarly frame of mind, a methodology for "attacking" a work of fiction. Essentially, we are asking them to perceive various patterns in a work. What we usually do in the class oral phase of analysis (vs. the written phase wherein our students are prompted to produce a scholarly note) is inquire if they have begun to perceive glimmers of any figures in the carpet. During such discussion students rarely notice the totality of any one pattern, at most seeing it represented/repeated twice.

By the time we reach Munro's story, we will have pointed out familiar patterns in lit in general (such as the use of the progression of the seasons and day, colors, objects in nature) and some recurring motifs in Am Lit (such as flight—especially bird imagery—and animal imagery in Naturalism). In "Walker Brothers Cowboy" we expect students will notice the following patterns, but if they don't, we will try to help them see:

- Nature (Transcendental theory of correspondences), light and dark
- Ben Jordan's songs of metafiction

- The influence of the past on the present (four examples)
- Three women as the three Classical fates
- Buildings
- Hands
- Ice cream
- Dust
- Initiation Story (which we usually break into four distinct types).

Once the patterns are identified, we will follow a traditional pedagogical pattern of our own and break the class into **literary communities** of three to five students, our favorite form of active learning. Each community will then be given a pattern. They will have to find all instances of the pattern, offer a hypothesis as to why they think Munro created the pattern, and present their findings to the class as a whole.

The fifth stage of the pyramid is **evaluating**. In this layer students are asked to compare various ideas, to assess the value of theories, to make choices, and to recognize their own personal biases (for instance, Charlie loves Hemingway because his grandmother hunted with Papa). Here we usually confront students with a series of questions:

- Which schools of literary criticism appear to offer the most help in understanding? Which schools offer the least?
- What literary theories supply insight? We might bring up Edward Said or even Wayne Booth's categorization of methods of narration.
- What patterns predominate in the story—i.e., show up most often?

With Munro, we expect our students to make some of the following evaluations. One, obviously "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is an initiation story and as such is concerned with time. Two, in the penultimate scene, Nora "touches the fender, making an unintelligible mark in the dust there" (1020), and this image is so central to the story that it functions as an objective correlative, a concept introduced earlier in the course with Eliot. Three, within the story are other stories, so obviously Munro's tale functions as metafiction. We will also try to help them see their own subjectivity in reading the story: because they are younger (at least than we), they will tend to identify with and like youthful protagonists. Women will prob-

ably be more interested in the narrator, Mrs. Jordan, Nora Cronin, and her blind mother; men, with Ben Jordan.

The highest stage of the pyramid is **creating**, what Bloom originally referred to as synthesis. For most instructors, creating means to use old ideas to create new ones, to generalize or draw conclusions on the work, and to relate the insights. For us, as we pointed out in our "Both Sides Now" trilogy in 2001, we want students to try a little creative writing to prove they have been able to internalize the five previous levels of the pyramid. Once again, we will try to follow our familiar pattern by asking students to write paragraphs in the style of Munro. Some assignments might be:

- Write an envelope for the story in which an older version of the narrator brings the present to bear upon the past. In other words, show that the narrator is more than objective and now offers some subjective insight to the overcast summer evening.
- Imagine a scene in which Nora's blind mother chastises her daughter for not being aggressive and pursuing Ben Jordan.
- Create an interior monolog wherein Mrs. Jordan, lying there with her eyes closed, considers the closed context of her life, especially as it relates to her husband and children.
- Summarize what might have happened had Ben Jordan chosen to marry Nora Cronin.

In order to write these one-pagers, students not only have to have read the story thoroughly, but they must be able to mimic Alice Munro's style. In truth, they must learn to see Alice Munro's world from the inside out.

Our final point is that in order to design the lesson, we as instructors have to go through all the various cognitive domains of the revised Bloom pyramid. In so doing we provide role models for students trying to develop their own intellectual skills as well as providing for them a path to a deeper understanding of Munro's story.

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